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White House initiates news leak control system

President Reagan backed away from an earlier order that all meetings between Administration officials and reporters at which national security matters are to be discussed must be cleared in advance with the White House.

A directive drafted by national security adviser William P. Clark, and approved by the President February 2, tightens the rules for dissemination of classified National Security Council documents. An earlier draft would have continued Reagan's January 12 requirement of advance notice of media contact. But after Clark showed portions of the draft to a group of White House reporters February 1 and heard their objections, the rule on White House clearance was dropped.

At a briefing, White House spokesman David R. Gergen told reporters the new presidential order "rescinds" the one promulgated last month when Reagan and Clark began a highly public counter-offensive against leaks of NSC documents and deliberations.

The new order requires that any classified NSC document bear a cover sheet that will have to be signed by any official given access to it—thus providing a paper trail for investigators should leaks occur subsequently.

The notice reads: "The attached document contains sensitive National Security Council information. It is to be read and discussed only by persons authorized by law.

"Your signature acknowledges you are such a person, and you promise you will show or discuss information contained in the document only with persons who are authorized by law to have access to this document.

"Persons handling this document acknowledge he or she knows and understands the security law relating thereto and will cooperate with any lawful investigation by the United States government into any unauthorized disclosure of classified information contained herein."

Gergen said Attorney General William French Smith will form a group of representatives of federal agencies by March 1 to study the effectiveness of current laws prohibiting disclosure of classified information.

The presidential directive was circulated to 15 cabinet departments and federal agencies that handle sensitive NSC information. An accompanying memo from Clark directed the agencies to hold access to such information to "the absolute minimum" and institute efforts to control strictly the dissemination and reproduction of NSC documents.

Gergen said the new Clark directive on leaks "draws a proper balance between the public's legitimate right to know and the government's need to protect classified information." He said the earlier requirement of advance clearance of media contacts had been dropped because reporters complained it "had a chilling effect" on the flow of news and threatened to restrict "legitimate contacts" between reporters and their sources.